

Stakeholders weigh in on environmental public health

By Ernie Hood

From its inception, the [Environmental Health Disparities and Environmental Justice Meeting](#) July 29-31 was designed to foster multidirectional communication among participants. The community partners, academics, healthcare professionals, and federal agency representatives who attended had ample opportunities to interact with each other to an extent rarely seen in such gatherings, giving everyone an opportunity to provide input.

"People came to engage, to listen, and to share," said co-organizer Liam O'Fallon, [NIEHS Partnerships for Environmental Public Health](#) program lead. "We planned for an interactive meeting, so it was very gratifying to see the level of interaction and engagement of the meeting participants from all across the country."

Scheduled for success

The meeting's format allowed myriad opportunities for attendees to work together effectively. Along with several general sessions, there was a series of [concurrent sessions](#)

(<http://www.niehs.nih.gov/news/newsletter/2013/9/spotlight-stakeholders/file489668.pdf>)

(890KB) focused on solutions in specific areas, such as tools and technologies, capacity-building, persistent inequities in Native American communities, and culturally appropriate communication strategies. Those twelve sessions culminated in a report-back session at the end of the meeting's second day, when a representative of each group described each session's conclusions and recommended next steps.

"The meeting was a lot more than just listening to presentations," said co-organizer Symma Finn, Ph.D., NIEHS health scientist administrator. "People were discussing what were the key issues that we need to remain focused on, so the slides from the report-back session are not so much a recommendation list, as a to-do list."

The report-back session was followed by a [poster session](#), (<http://www.niehs.nih.gov/news/newsletter/2013/9/spotlight-stakeholders/file491330.pdf>)

(714KB) where 35 different academic and community groups had the opportunity to share their achievements and findings.

Day three of the meeting was devoted entirely to [workshops](#), (<http://www.niehs.nih.gov/news/newsletter/2013/9/spotlight-stakeholders/file489974.pdf>)

(733KB) where community members demonstrated how to effectively engage communities, based on their own experiences in the field. Finn was particularly excited about the workshops, as community partners shared best practices, successes, and challenges.

The workshops covered a wide range of approaches used in community engagement, including a workshop, Do No Harm, based on the experiences of the North Carolina Environmental Justice Network, and a session, Theatre of the Oppressed, that was highly effective at breaking down barriers to communication. Other workshops featured grassroots reports from community groups in health disparate communities in Southern California, Louisiana coastal communities, New York's Lower East Side, and the inner city of Philadelphia.

Power to the partners

Throughout the meeting, the emphasis was on the power of partnerships to effect change. NIEHS scientist Christine Ekenga, Ph.D., who moderated the concurrent session Cumulative Exposures: The Role of Epidemiology in Elucidating Environmental Contributions to Health Disparities, powerfully expressed the sentiment during the report-back session.



Community-level mapping of GIS data contributes to the body of evidence linking social and physical environmental factors to adverse health outcomes. Beverly Xaviera Watkins, Ph.D., of Weill Cornell Medical College, described the research methods used by her community-academic research partnership to educate, advocate, and organize in New York's impoverished Lower East Side. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



Former NIEHS and NTP Director Kenneth Olden, Ph.D., left, moderated a panel discussion on the use of geographic and spatial analysis, to examine environmental determinants of health and engage communities around environmental public health issues. He was joined, from left, by panel members Saboby Wilson, Ph.D., from the University of Maryland; Paul Juarez, Ph.D., of the University of Tennessee Health Science Center; and Watkins. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)

"The take-away message from our session and from this entire conference is don't underestimate the power of community members and researchers working together," Ekenga said. "When you have community members and the public supporting the work, it's a powerful combination, and it's important for us not to underestimate that power."

(Ernie Hood is a contract writer with the NIEHS Office of Communications and Public Liaison.)



Closing out the general session July 30 on Challenges and Opportunities for Supporting Community-Based Research to Address Environmental Health Disparities and Environmental Justice, attendees were asked to participate in a unique neighbor-to-neighbor discussion period, to make new connections and come up with new ideas. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



During the animated neighbor-to-neighbor discussion, Laurel Schaidler, Ph.D., right, of the Harvard School of Public Health, shared insights from her work on metal mixtures and children's health with Donele Wilkins, of the Green Door Initiative in Detroit. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



The meeting drew a capacity audience of community partners from as far away as Alaska and Hawaii, including Viola Waghiyi, director of the Environmental Health and Justice Program for the Alaska Community Action on Toxics and a member of the [National Advisory Environmental Health Sciences Council](#). (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



Ekenga, a postdoctoral fellow in the Epidemiology Branch at NIEHS, reported the results of the concurrent session on cumulative exposures. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



The meeting included lively Q&A periods during the concurrent and workshop sessions. Above, Wig Zamore of the Somerville Transportation Equity Partnership in Massachusetts, responded to a point made during a panel discussion. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



"The poster session allowed for that higher level of interaction and discussion that meetings are supposed to achieve and often do not," Finn observed. "This meeting was set up to promote people just being able to talk to each other, and it worked. The poster session was a perfect example." (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



John Doyle of the Crow Environmental Health Steering Committee (CEHSC), Little Big Horn College in Montana, discussed his group's poster, "Addressing Disparities in Safe Drinking Water Access on the Crow Reservation, Montana," with Finn. The poster described lessons learned in conducting community-based participatory research on water quality in the Crow tribal community through the CEHSC, and in working to upgrade water and wastewater infrastructure in the complex legal and jurisdictional reservation environment. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



Neasha Graves, left, of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, discussed outreach and communication with Marti Lindsey, Ph.D., of the University of Arizona. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



Linda Easley, Ph.D., left, of Siena Heights University, talked with Elizabeth Guzy, of the Harvard Superfund Program, about how inspiring this meeting was for her work among Latinos. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



Miller described her program in Alaska as part of the panel session on Challenges and Opportunities for Supporting Community-based Research to Address Environmental Health Disparities and Environmental Justice. Also pictured is panel presenter, Thomas Arcury, Ph.D., of Wake Forest University. It was one of several opportunities for participants to engage their colleagues in open-ended Q&A sessions. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)

Nuts and bolts from the grassroots

One of the presentations during the meeting's general session devoted to discussion of challenges and opportunities associated with community-based research exemplifies the action-oriented and pragmatic nature of the proceedings. Pamela Miller, executive director of [Alaska Community Action on Toxics](http://www.akaction.org/), (<http://www.akaction.org/>) described her group's mission and activities.

"We are a small, non-profit environmental health and justice research and advocacy organization. We do community-based participatory research at the invitation of communities throughout Alaska. We have conducted a lot of focused work on St. Lawrence Island in the northern Bering Sea, but we also work with other communities who requested our assistance, and we try to transform these requests for assistance into some type of systemic change, whether that's interventions in the community or some policy-level changes. We hold workshops, we do community-based outreach, training, and education, and we provide technical assistance and capacity-building."

Miller also talked about how her group has not only survived, but also thrived.

"I think all community-based organizations have found that it's a really tenuous thing to try to sustain the work that we do in the community. I think the way that we've gotten through some hard times is by making a deliberate effort to diversify our funding base, to really cultivate community support for the work that we do. We've not only raised funding through members, major donors, and foundation partners, but in the last couple of years we've tried some new approaches to do mission-related enterprises that hopefully not only provide jobs for the environment, but also bring some resources back into our organization to support the work we do. We've started a [green cleaning service](http://www.akaction.org/green_clean_team.html) (http://www.akaction.org/green_clean_team.html) that employs workers in the community, who are supported with sustainable jobs, to go out and do non-toxic cleaning in homes and businesses. We have an [Anchorage Farmer's Market project](http://www.akaction.org/tackling_toxics/yard-garden/anchorage_farmers_market.html) (http://www.akaction.org/tackling_toxics/yard-garden/anchorage_farmers_market.html) where we sell compost tea and organic [vegetable] starts, and we have a [community gardening program](http://www.akaction.org/Tackling_Toxics/Yard-Garden/Organic_Methods.html#Organic_Workshops) (http://www.akaction.org/Tackling_Toxics/Yard-Garden/Organic_Methods.html#Organic_Workshops) that also helps bring resources back into the organization."

The Environmental Factor is produced monthly by the [National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences \(NIEHS\)](http://www.niehs.nih.gov/) (<http://www.niehs.nih.gov/>)

, Office of Communications and Public Liaison. The content is not copyrighted, and it can be reprinted without permission. If you use parts of Environmental Factor in your publication, we ask that you provide us with a copy for our records. We welcome your [comments and suggestions](#). (bruskec@niehs.nih.gov)

This page URL: NIEHS website: <http://www.niehs.nih.gov/>
Email the Web Manager at webmanager@niehs.nih.gov